Patriarchy's Victims: Coriolanus and Volumnia in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

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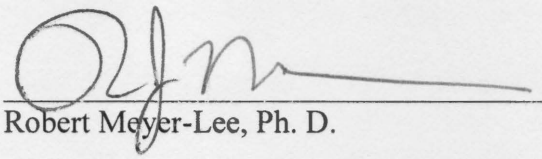

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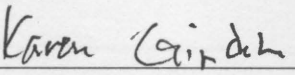

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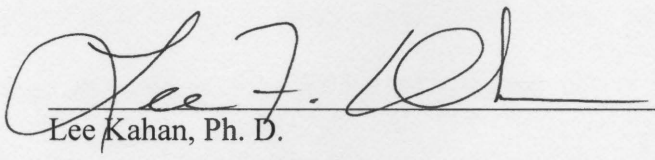

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Curriculum Vitae

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* depicts the Roman Republic full of uncertainty and upheaval. In the midst of this conflict, a man named Canius Martius, who battled in the Tarquin War and battles thereafter with neighboring tribes, rises to esteem in Roman society. However, the play opens to a chorus of plebeian citizens enraged at Martius for withholding grain from the populace. Their hatred is diluted by the fear of the advancing army of the Volsces, and Martius accompanies one consul to the Volsces city and conquers the day singlehandedly. Following his victories, the senators elect him Consul and give him the honorary title of Coriolanus;[1] however, he must first submit to showing his battle wounds and beg the approval of the citizens and their representative tribunes. He falters while speaking in the city square and berates the citizens whose tribunes suggest the citizens turn against Coriolanus. Successful in their plot, the Tribunes exile Coriolanus from the city. Coriolanus vows revenge on Rome by joining with Tulius Aufidus, the leader of the Volsces. In an effort to exact the revenge he feels the city deserves, Coriolanus besieges Rome. His mother, Volumnia, averts disaster for Rome after convincing her son to retreat and is hailed the "Patroness of Rome" while Coriolanus returns to the Volsces' camp to be assassinated for his inaction.

This play shows how patriarchal expectations directly lead to the demise of a man who, along with his mother, attempts to uphold these expectations, which I define below. Shakespeare creates a nuclear family that is composed of only the barebones necessary: a mother and a child. The child's father dies after fathering it, yet before the child's birth. The mother, Volumnia, unquestionably believes she must compensate for the absence of

1. Caius Martius is awarded the name Coriolanus in Act I, Scene 9. For the purposes of simplicity, I will refer to him as Coriolanus throughout my paper.

a male figure in her son's life in order to propagate patriarchal ideals. As a grown man, Coriolanus attempts to be the perfect patriarch yet fails due to the inherent faults in the patriarchal system concerning masculinity and gender roles. While seemingly logical, the strict organization of society under a patriarchal system allows for no deviancy, and therefore, some people fail to be the men or women they are expected to be. After reviewing the nature and history of the patriarchal system in Early Modern England, I will pursue this argument first by situating it in respect to two dominant critical approaches to the play and by providing additional historical background on child rearing and masculinity in Shakespeare's day, and then by examining in detail the full breadth of the play, focusing in particular on the relations between Volumnia and Coriolanus and how this relationship is perceived by others. Through this reading, a new vein of criticism emerges displaying the destructive power of patriarchy when its ideals are fully embraced by a vulnerable family.

Coriolanus was written between the years of 1605 and 1608, a few short years after James I & VI's ascension to the English throne. The early seventeenth century saw the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Early Modern period in British history, and *Coriolanus* is an interesting commentary on the backward, yet still strongly entrenched, patriarchal system. The term "patriarchal system" refers to the political practices, as well to the cultural expectations of Early Modern society. Tracing its roots back to the Medieval period, patriarchy stemmed from the political need for a symbiotic relationship between ruler and citizen. When a king needed a knight to bring men to fight off a neighboring king and his army, a vassal was expected to serve his king. When that same vassal was attacked, the king would send other vassals to his aid. Deference and

service to one's patriarch (in this case one's king) as well as masculine skills in warfare were highly prized identifying marks of a nobleman.

As the Early Modern period emerged, political patriarchy declined in necessity and instead rooted itself within Early Modern culture and societal expectations. In his book *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800,* Lawrence Stone explains the shift away from extended kinship ties and clientage loyalties in the Early Modern period. The kinship – clientage relationship that had been necessary for small principalities in order to protect their land in the Early and Mid-Middle Ages became increasingly unneeded with the onset of large, wealthy monarchies that maintained standing armies and navies. As this symbiotic relationship between king and lord declined, it manifested in the management of noble families. Stone further argues that Early Modern English issues such as religious freedom and political ideology broke down previous extended kinship ties, and thus patriarchy as a larger social construct fell away (96). While the new modern monarchies of the seventeenth century no longer needed kinship-clientage ties to provide soldiers, the one place patriarchy remained was within the nuclear family, and the cultural expectations placed upon gender and sex. Stone defines patriarchy as "the despotic authority of husband and father" (109) and continues to explain,

> Patriarchy…depends not so much on raw power or legal authority, as on a recognition by all concerned of its legitimacy, hallowed by ancient tradition, moral theology, and political theory. It survives and flourishes only so long as it is not questioned and challenged….The growth of patriarchy was deliberately encouraged by the new Renaissance state on the traditional grounds that the subordination of the family to its head is

> analogous to, and also a direct contributory cause of, subordination of subjects to the sovereign. (109-110)

Patriarchy was constantly reinforced in the Early Modern household through the physical subjugation of women and children. Corporal punishment was common and encouraged within the household, school, and apprenticeship positions. Stone explains, "Whipping was the normal method of discipline…mitigated and compensated for by a good deal of fondling when the child was docile and obedient" (120). Patriarchy as a social construct readily approved physical punishment and reward. Interestingly, Stone elaborates, "Up to the age of seven, the children were mostly left in the care of women…. Many of these women were demonstratively affectionate, but they all believe in the current doctrine of the need to crush the will" (120-121). Despite being raised by women, most children were still regarded as animals that needed to be broken for their own good. While patriarchy regularly dismissed women as the "weaker vessel," it nonetheless expected women who raised children to rule aggressively over their charges. Volumnia certainly fits the mold of this maternal expectation.

In the current scholarship on this topic, most of the arguments have tended to place blame upon Volumnia "as the ultimate in domineering mothers" (Jankowski 102) and thus a psychoanalytic approach to the play and to Coriolanus himself has been the most popular despite weaknesses that I will explain later. The prominent and hence representative psychoanalytical critic of the play is Janet Adelman. In her article "'Anger's my Meat:' Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus,*" Adelman examines the many discussions of food as a form of weakness and dependency for both Coriolanus and Volumnia. Adelman frankly observes, "One does not need the help of a

psychoanalytic approach to notice that Volumnia is not a nourishing mother" (109). Further critics such as R. B. Parker also feel the need to blame Volumnia for Coriolanus's failures with little attention paid to the societal forces at play in Coriolanus's and Volumnia's lives.

Adelman identifies the foundation of Coriolanus's issues as rooted within his atypical relationship with Volumnia. As the inhabitants of Rome await Coriolanus's siege, Menenius, the only father-like figure in Coriolanus's life, remarks, "There is no more mercy in him than there is milk in a male tiger" (5.4.28-30). Adelman concludes that Menenius "associates Coriolanus's lack of humanity not only with the absence of any nurturing female element in him but also with the absence of mother's milk itself" (109). Withholding food from an infant is cruel, yet Volumnia prides herself on the ways she "strengthened" Coriolanus at ages when any typical mother would have wept to do such a thing.

Fearful of the effects of being fatherless, Coriolanus and Volumnia take drastic measures to strengthen the appearance and stature of Coriolanus. By focusing on food and dependency through the play, Adelman argues that Volumnia systematically tries to free Coriolanus from dependence on anyone. Despite his denial, Coriolanus comes to realize that the person he most depends on is his mother. While she strove to teach him self-sufficiency from others, she neglected to teach him how to survive without her in the background. Adelman argues that Coriolanus's failure and death are direct results of his desire to be free of his mother's grasp, not a direct effect of patriarchy and its expectations. She writes, "The whole of his masculine identity depends on his transformation of his vulnerability into an instrument of attack.... The rigid masculinity

that Coriolanus finds in war becomes a defense against acknowledgement of his neediness (110-111). Coriolanus employs the skill he has for warfare to ward off any attacks that could be made on his masculinity.

Adelman lastly comments on Coriolanus's attempts to free himself from his mother's grasp. The attack on Corioli is like a rebirth. Coriolanus rushes the city gates exclaiming, "Come on; / If you'll stand fast, we'll beat them to their wives" (1.4.52-53). Rather than being accompanied, Coriolanus is singularly swallowed up by the gates of Corioli and then reappears a few minutes later covered in blood. Adelman argues, "The assault on Corioli is both a rape and a rebirth: the underlying fantasy is that intercourse is a literal return to the womb, from which one is reborn, one's own author. The fantasy of self-authorship is complete when Coriolanus is given his new name, earned by his own actions" (113). But, as Adelman points out, as she brings the paper to a close, even the attack on Corioli is done exactly as Volumnia predicts as she sits at home with her daughter-in-law awaiting news of the battle. Therefore, even Coriolanus's most desperate attempt to free himself is performed entirely the way Volumnia expects him to perform. Thus, he is no more freed of his mother than a slave is of his master. All of Coriolanus's actions are at the behest of his mother, whether he knows it or not. In the final scene between the mother and son, Volumnia plays the ultimate bluff. She allows Coriolanus to believe that he can conquer her, but in doing so, he will destroy himself and the thing that created him. Implying to Coriolanus that should he tread on Rome, he will tread on his mother's womb, she asserts his utter dependence on her, for she was the one who gave him life. Adelman concludes, as Volumnia grasps the hand of young Martius, "the presence of his own child, holding Volumnia's hand, strengthens her power over him....

As his fantasy of self-sufficiency threatens to becomes a reality, it becomes too frightening to sustain" (161). By reenacting the mother-son bond between herself and her grandson, Volumnia proves to Coriolanus that he cannot survive without her.

Adelman gracefully addresses the inconsistencies of Coriolanus's desperate attempts to free himself from the control of Volumnia when his only method of doing so is violent attack, which is exactly what she trained him to do. In effect, he rails against her in the way she taught him and, therefore, achieves nothing. Adelman's argument does not encompass any mention of patriarchy or the societal forces at play in this complex mother-son relationship. We have little understanding of Volumnia's motive. Her actions are justifiably vilified; however, it begs the question: What, as well as whose, purpose do Volumnia's actions serve?

Theodora Jankowski's book *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* explores female power figures in Shakespeare's plays by blending historical scholarship of Early Modern societal expectations with a close reading of the play, offering a defense of Volumnia's character quite contrary to Adelman's views. Referring to Adelman's and others' studies, she initially identifies Volumnia as

> Probably the least admired of Shakespeare's women characters…seen as the ultimate in domineering mothers, she is held by many critics to have raised her son to be bloodthirsty and unattractive only to engineer his final destruction through her own failure to engender nurturing qualities in him. (102)

Taking issue with this view, she states,

> Most critics attribute to Volumnia a maternal power that is strong enough to allow her to be considered the sole cause of her son's inadequacies and his ultimate death [and] these readings subscribe to some degree to an essentialized notion of motherhood as well as to a belief that the mother is the most important determiner of her child's adult behavior. (103-104)

Jankowski opens up a completely new angle to the argument by identifying the present underlying assumptions within previous scholarship about what a "good mother" is and what a "good mother" does.

Jankowski argues that if we take into account the ideologies expressed by the Roman society of the time and its concepts of "Roman virtue," then Volumnia in fact is a successful mother. Without acknowledging the context of either the Roman culture or Early Modern culture, critics who label Volumnia as simply "bad" are simplistic in their readings of the play. These critics ignore that the family

> is an ideological state apparatus whose duty is to instill the ideological beliefs of any given society into its own children. Thus, any mother cannot be said to "create" her children by herself in the sense that she is exclusively and personally responsible for the development of the ideologies it inculcates in her children.... In order to be a successful mother, the character Volumnia needs to inculcate in her son the ideologies of the Roman state. (Jankowski 106)

Jankowski explains that any critic must recognize that children are not only molded by their mothers but also by the culture they live in. The culture values specific ideologies, and one must pose one's argument on the grounds of the character's and writer's context.

Jankowski shifts the blame from Volumnia's mothering to her unfeminine involvement in politics, which creates a tension within the patriarchy of Rome. Jankowski observes, "Volumnia compares badly to an ideology that sees all women as, at best, chaste, silent, and obedient. In addition to being a non-nurturing mother, she falls under censure because she is a very verbal woman" (109). It is her verbal empowerment and her position as a widow that grants Volumnia power. In Early Modern society, widows with a grown son possessed an oddly secure bastion of power. Jankowski argues, "Volumnia is without any specific and direct male guidance throughout the play. In fact, if the Early Modern mother can be thought to be under her son's control once he reaches his majority, Volumnia can be seen as scorning that control by retaining control over her son" (109). Volumnia is a fearful character because she operates within the bounds of patriarchal society but in a way that conflicts with cultural practice.

Jankowski lastly concludes that the destructive nature of *virtus*[2] combined with Volumnia's political abilities end in disastrous consequences for this family. According to Jankowski, Volumnia takes specific action to involve herself in the political arena, an arena saved for men. In doing so, she rightly garners the blame attached to her by a patriarchal ideology that believes women should be silent and uninvolved. Jankowski's historicist approach is a great improvement over Adelman's psychoanalytic on in recognizing the historically specific ideologies shaping Volumnia's actions. Yet, beyond the choices of Volumnia, the patriarchal system is programmed to destroy even the desperate moves people make within the realm of approved action. Contrary to

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2. In her essay "*Coriolanus*: Shakespeare's Anatomy of *Virtus*," Phyllis Rackin defines *virtus* as "valiantness or manliness, [the] ideal that governs Coriolanus and his society" (70). Virtus is only an effective characteristic for a warrior.

Jankowski's arguments, Volumnia's political involvement is not shunned by the male characters who depict prominent Roman politicians. Instead, they respect her. Volumnia tries to keep herself safely entrenched within the confines prescribed for her as a woman, mother, and widow. As she drifts outside the bounds of the feminine world, she does not garner chastisement from the body politic because Rome is still benefitting from having Coriolanus on their side. He is an undefeated warrior, so his value excuses his mother's actions. As she witnesses Coriolanus struggling, she deftly moves into a masculine world and proves herself capable of participating. Volumnia preps Coriolanus twice for his presentations to the plebeians before the people and shows a knack for politics that outshines her son's. When her son betrays Rome, she is forced to serve Rome, as she can no longer appear to be serving her son. Shortly after she saves the city, the citizens hail her as their patroness, yet, in an instant, her usefulness is at an end. By the close of Act five, she is cast aside, and her son suffers the ultimate punishment.

Hence, despite their differences, both Adelman and Jankowski place too much blame directly on Volumnia. Volumnia functions within the confines of the patriarchy defined for her by the leaders of Rome. If she is able to accomplish these acts within accepted norms, then arguably the norms set by patriarchy are not working. Shakespeare's play offers a strong critique of patriarchy and its double standards. Shakespeare shows the destructive potential of the form on which society is based and through which order is achieved. Shakespeare uses the setting of a militaristic world to expose the crevices into which people can fall when they over-zealously believe in patriarchy. Neither Coriolanus nor Volumnia directly challenge the world that destroys them in five short acts. Their ignorance is the crux of the tragedy. Jankowski's argument

that Volumnia merely operates the way she perceives that she is expected to operate is spot on. Yet, I disagree that Volumnia's direct involvement in politics is the culprit of hers and Coriolanus's final destruction. The leading political characters praise her from beginning to end and therefore praise her attack upon her own child. The pressures placed on men by patriarchy are equally destructive. Coriolanus begins the play enacting the will of Rome through his own hands. When he shifts his loyalty, he must be destroyed by the society that created him.

Patriarchy demands Volumnia create a man and then destroy him. I shall examine Coriolanus's and Volumnia's downfall as a strictly sociocultural problem. I argue that both Volumnia and her son, Coriolanus, are destroyed by the society that they so earnestly uphold. The key element missing from current scholarship is a solid placement of blame upon the patriarchal system of social organization. By embracing the ideals of masculinity set forth in patriarchal societies, Coriolanus and Volumnia attempt to compensate for their lack of a father/husband in their family and fulfill the expectations they believe exist for them. *Coriolanus* shows how these nostalgic ideals of masculinity in the early sixteenth century, if fully embraced by a man in a position of power and stress, and by a woman left to raise a son on her own, will in the actual sociopolitical circumstances of the day be highly destructive for both of them.

To return, briefly, to the sociocultural context, in his book *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500-1800,* Anthony Fletcher explains that much of a child's early years were spent in the company of female caregivers. Birthing and nursing of babies were strictly female affairs, and even some men, such as Robert Burton, believed "It was odd and effeminate for men to play with their children" (Fletcher 86). This

women's world of childrearing invoked worry on the part of men. Feminine behavior and society were considered weak and delicate: "The physical body was seen as vulnerable to the pressures of a blurred gender system.... Men were nervous about whether their boys would acquire the secure manhood to which the inheritance of their hotter seed entitled them" (87). As boys grew out of their toddler years, they would be ceremonially "breeched" or given breeches to wear for the first time. The shift from the soft world of women and mothers to the hard world of manhood was rather stark and jolting. Fletcher explains, "Early modern England had no developed concept of adolescence, but there was a notion of the rough activities of youth which was an essential part of the making of manhood" (88).

Fletcher's work further illustrates the pressures and expectations intrinsic in the patriarchal system. The foundation of patriarchy lies in its outward appearance, and the effects trickle down into the psyches and outlooks of the people entrenched in the system. Fletcher concludes,

> Men were struggling with enforcing patriarchy on the basis of outward gender significations. This meant two things. Firstly, that male control had to be seen to rest upon a firm and decisive identification of sexual identity, even where that identification was not actually decisive, only this could give maleness a sense of privilege and a sense of visible differentiation. Secondly, heterosexual mating must remain normative. The structures of patriarchy had to remain in control.... (83)

Patriarchy cannot survive without easily identifiable marks of its existence in a society. Patriarchy depends on masculinity's triumph over femininity, and that triumph must be

demonstrated regularly to sustain the system. In order to maintain the health of a system like this, masculinity must be further fostered and cultured by society so that it will perpetuate through the years.

In Early Modern society, grown men refuted any perceived effeminacy by engaging in manly activities. Coriolanus is seen doing this throughout the play, in particular as he storms Corioles. Approaching the gates of the city Coriolanus shouts, "Come on! / If you'll stand fast, we'll beat them to their wives" (1.4.52-53). For Coriolanus, the attack on the city can be explained in sexual terms of rape. Assaulting the city allows soldiers to rape the wives of the city. Fletcher mentions the work of Eric Partridge, who investigated the usage of language that "portrays intercourse as an act of male dominance" (93). This moment shows Coriolanus demonstratively asserting his masculinity for his audience of soldiers. It is right after this moment that his symbolic rebirth occurs (as explained by Adelman), and Coriolanus emerges bloody and is renamed Coriolanus. This patriarchal world is highly anti-feminist, yet also highly destructive for a man. In order to participate in this world, men like Coriolanus strive constantly to outshine others in manliness, aggressiveness, and virility, all to appease a social construct that inevitably destroys them. Patriarchy sets up a man like Coriolanus for ultimate failure; he suffers at the hands of this proscribed world. Volumnia fails as a mother who tries to create an ideal man.

Volumnia's maternal style prior to the action of the play is often retold as a commentary on the current action of the play. By the middle of Act I, the audience is made aware of Coriolanus's family situation and the fact that he was raised solely by his mother. Immediately we are drawn into Volumnia's reminiscing about her choices to

make Coriolanus into a man, stemming from a deepset fear of his lack of masculine tutelage as a boy. We witness a revealing moment when Volumnia and Virgilia (Coriolanus's wife) are waiting for news of Coriolanus's exploits in battle. A noblewoman enters the room and asks, "How does your little son?" Virgilia answers, "I thank your ladyship; well, good madam." Volumnia adds, "He had rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster" (1.3.56-59). Virgilia's answer is simple and lacks attention to the expectations of young boys' behavior. On the other hand, Volumnia immediately offers details that show that her grandson is interested in warfare and not schoolwork. Early in the play, Shakespeare shows what Volumnia values in a boy. As Fletcher would predict, Volumnia's actions and speech insist upon the outward appearance of patriarchal behavior, even in a young boy's playtime.

At the outset of the play, Shakespeare establishes the people's knowledge of Volumnia and Coriolanus's relationship. Enraged citizens spar over Coriolanus's successes in the defense of Rome. One man frankly remarks, "Though soft-conscienced men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother" (1.1.36-38). Even the lowliest citizens know of Volumnia's influence on her son and the choices he makes to display his manhood on the battlefield. This moment immediately identifies the stronghold Volumnia has on her son and how his actions are often inspired by his imaginings of her approval. All the while, the two women in Coriolanus's life, Volumnia and Virgilia, sit at home and sew, while awaiting news of the battle against Corioles. Volumnia begins by commanding her daughter-in-law to relax, as it is clear Virgilia is worried. Volumnia is cold and hard, traits associated with masculinity, while Virgilia is

clearly soft and feminine. This stark contrast continues to pervade the play as Coriolanus interacts with his family.

Stemming from the fear rooted in her heart that her fatherless son may not transition away from his effeminate beginnings as a boy within a woman's world, Volumnia made a desperate choice to thrust her son into a war at an earlier age than expected. Volumnia shows an obsession with renown for her son, and she went so far as a young mother to send her son to war when

> He was but tender-bodied…I, considering how honor would become such a person…was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak. …I tell thee daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man. (1.3.6-18)

As Cominius, a patrician general, retells the glories of Coriolanus, he informs us that Coriolanus was sixteen years old when he first entered battle:

> with his Amazonian chin he drove
> The bristled lips before him…I' th' Consul's view
> Slew three opposers…In that day's feats,
> When he might act the woman in the scene,
> He proved the best man i' th' field…His pupil age
> Man-entered thus…. (2.2.107-15)

As Cominius informs the audience of Coriolanus's deeds as a young warrior, he compares Coriolanus's smooth chin with that of an Amazon. The opposing forces of

youth and lethal power are equated with the opposing nature of Amazonian warriors – female, yet deadly. It is clear from Cominius's statement that it was uncommon to be so young a soldier, yet the leaders of Rome clearly admire Coriolanus's wartime achievements. Volumnia's ambitions for her son prove to benefit Coriolanus himself and Volumnia as the creator of such a tremendous warrior.

As Volumnia rushes to meet her son as he victoriously parades home from the battle, she reveals a dark excitement: Coriolanus has suffered battle wounds. She is joined by Menenius, an older patrician who claims Coriolanus "called [him] father" (5.1.3), and she explains, "He was wont to come home wounded" (2.1.123). "Wont" means "to be accustomed to;" therefore, we learn that Coriolanus nearly always comes home wounded. Volumnia continues, "O, he is wounded, I thank the gods for 't" (2.1.125). Coriolanus's wounds provide physical evidence of his presence in the battle and defend his heroic actions. Had he returned without wounds, people could question his involvement. Menenius asks, "Where is he wounded?" [Volumnia responds,] "I' th' shoulder and i' th' left arm. There will be large cicatrices [scars] to show the people when he shall stand for his place…He had, before this last expedition, twenty-five wounds upon him" (2.1.151-59). Volumnia wants physical wounds and scars to show the people when Coriolanus makes his case before the masses for the consulship. While we are led to believe that it is only Volumnia who wants these wounds, the metaphor is that patriarchy also demands the blood of its men. Coriolanus will be sacrificed for Rome and Volumnia will share in his destruction eventually, but for now, patriarchy victimizes this mother into believing that her son's blood will convey glory to her family. It is at this moment that the audience begins to witness Volumnia's ambition for her son and her lack

of maternal affection. The pain and anguish he suffered in receiving the wounds are inconsequential. It is this scene in particular that most defends a reading of the play similar to Adelman's analysis. What mother desires her son to be wounded? Yet, we must consider why she believes these things. Volumnia herself is a product of the patriarchy of her culture and simply manipulates the expectations to best feed the ambition she has for her son.

As Coriolanus triumphantly enters the stage from the battle, the first person he speaks to is his mother. In deference to her superiority, he immediately kneels before her and offers the following: "You have, I know, petitioned all the gods / for my prosperity" (2.1.176-77). Volumnia immediately insists he rise; however, to the witnesses of their greeting, his actions have already revealed a complex relationship. Volumnia does not want their inverse relationship to be shown to others. Coriolanus must always appear the victor, the patriarch. Yet, it is made clear from the outset of the play that Coriolanus is the puppet, and Volumnia the puppeteer. As it becomes clear that Coriolanus will attempt the consulship, Volumnia pushes Coriolanus further: "I have lived / To see inherited my very wishes…Only / There's one thing wanting, which I doubt no but / Our Rome will cast upon thee" (2.1.215-19). Moments after his return from battle, Volumnia presses him onto another ambition: the consulship. Coriolanus responds, "Know, good mother, / I had rather be their servant in my way / Than sway with them in theirs" (2.1.220-22). Coriolanus expressly tells his mother that he is not made of the stuff to be a politician. He is a soldier and has no desire to enter the political realm wherein he knows he will fail. Volumnia pushes her son in order to promote herself. She has reached success as the mother of a decorated warrior, and now, she desires to be the mother of a Consul. In

promoting patriarchy's ideals in her son, she also ignited a desire within herself. In the years she has spent training her son, she has taught herself how to be the masculine ideal. In inculcating the ideologies of patriarchy in her son, Volumnia has inadvertently instilled those beliefs in herself.

Menenius, the one man who doubled as a father-figure for Coriolanus, tries to defend Coriolanus's limitations. He is able to see a separation between man-warrior and man-politician. In frustration, Coriolanus verbally attacks the populace, and they turn against him. Menenius tries to support Coriolanus's cause to the plebians. He implores: "Consider this: he has been bred i' th' wars / Since he could draw a sword, and is ill schooled / In bolted language" (3.1.408-10). Menenius recognizes Coriolanus's strengths and limitations. He is a warrior; he is not a politician. "Since he could draw a sword" implies ever since Coriolanus could physically draw a sword out of a scabbard, he has been training to be a fighter, not a speaker. When Coriolanus was a young boy, Volumnia claims that her "praises made [him] first a soldier" (3.2.134), and thus it is clear that Coriolanus was encouraged from a young age to become a fearless soldier. He was not trained to enter politics. Unfortunately, a political career path opens for him, and Volumnia pressures him forward despite his weaknesses and lack of training.

Volumnia proves her superiority over her son by showing her aptitude for politics, which far outweighs the skills of her protégé. In contrast, Coriolanus broods upon his mother's ambitions for him. All his life he has sought her approval, yet he wonders, "I muse my mother / Does not approve me further, who was wont / to call them woolen vassels…[*Volumnia enters*] I talk of you. / Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me / False to my nature?" (3.2.8-17). Coriolanus has heard his mother disparage the

plebeians, rather than appease or commend them. Coriolanus believes himself to be his own man, that his nature is a product of himself, and now, his mother wishes him otherwise. The reality is that he is her creation, and she is once again bent on molding him further. The problem is Coriolanus has spent his life learning the practices of a soldier and is ill-equipped to acquire new skills for the political arena. She answers his accusation, "Pray be counseled. / I have a heart as little apt as yours, / But yet a brain that leads my use of anger / To better vantage" (3.2.36-39). Volumnia quickly reproves her son and tells him he must convey his anger to control the people. She clearly expresses that she is more apt for politics than he is, yet he is the man. While she would likely be the better candidate as a politician, her gender prohibits her inclusion. The only way she can involve herself is through her son's successes. He becomes her victim, and she is the victim of a society that excludes her simply due to sex.

Playing upon what she knows a politician must do, Volumnia coaches him to take the podium once more. She advises him to speak "with such words that are but roted in / Your tongue…of no allowance to your bosom's truth" (3.2.71-73). Volumnia feeds him his "lines" and follows with stage directions. "Go to them with this bonnet in thy hand…Thy knee bussing the stones – for in such business / Action is eloquence, and the eyes of th' ignorant / more learnèd than the ears" (3.2.91-96). Volumnia does nothing to hide her contempt of the plebian citizens; however, she instead simply commands her son to submit to their judgment. As he continues to stall, she commands him in the presence of the other patrician leaders, "Prithee, now, say you will, and go about it" (3.2.122). Again he begs her to stop: "You have put me now to such a part which never / I shall discharge to th' life" (3.2.129-30). Aimed at Volumnia, Coriolanus explains he will never

convincingly play the part of the politician and that his failure is guaranteed. She persuades him through guilt: "My praises made thee first a soldier, so, / To have my praise for this, perform a part / Thou hast not done before" (3.2.134-36). Reaching into his memories of past successes, she reminds her son that it was her praises that made him successful, and, therefore, the praises he will receive after completing this task will also grant him the success he needs. Coriolanus again answers, "I will not do't" (3.2.147) to which Volumnia fires back:

> At thy choice, then.
> To beg of thee, it is my more dishonor
> Than thou of them. Come to all ruin. Let
> Thy mother rather feel thy pride than fear
> Thy dangerous stoutness, for I mock at death
> With as big heart as thou. Do as thou list.
> Thy valiantness was mine; thou suck'st from me. (3.2.151-57)

Volumnia manipulates her son by accusing him of dishonoring her and by saying his stoutness is nothing to her own. Lastly, she scolds him that his "valiantness" was originally hers and that in nursing him, he took it from her. One can read the verb "suck'st" as if she gave it freely in nursing or that Coriolanus stole it from her as a mosquito sucks blood from the host. By being female and by raising a son, Volumnia could not escape the reality that her son would rob her of a piece of her strength and valor. Coriolanus can no longer protest, particularly with fellow patricians standing by, witnessing this manipulation of a grown man by his mother. He trudges to the podium, begging his mother to "Chide me no more…Look, I am going" (3.2.161-64). Displaying

his ultimate subjugation to his mother, Coriolanus walks away with his mother's triumphant eyes watching him. Under his breath to Menenius he adds, "Let them accuse me by invention, I / Will answer in mine honor" (3.2.174-75). Coriolanus realizes that, while behind the curtains his mother can scold and manipulate him, once in the public realm, she cannot speak and act for him. It is clear that Coriolanus intends to speak exactly as he desires. He wants the people to make accusations against him, so that he might admonish them as soundly as he did the first time.

Coriolanus approaches the people with every intention of rebuking them. As he steps before the plebians with Menenius at his side, the tribunes badger him, trying to elicit an imprudent response. As his blood begins to boil, Menenius steps in saying:

> Lo, citizens…The warlike service he has done, consider. Think
> Upon the wounds his body bears…Consider further,
> That when he speaks not like a citizen,
> You find him like a soldier. Do not take
> His rougher accents for malicious sounds. (3.3.64-73)

Menenius tries to emphasize to the people that Coriolanus is a soldier, not a politician. Just as Coriolanus himself recognized while Volumnia pushed him on, so too does Menenius know that politics is not an arena in which Coriolanus will likely be successful. Menenius tries to pacify the emotions of both the plebians and Coriolanus, yet it all is for nought. To the accusations of treason raised by the tribunes, Coriolanus rebukes the crowd as Menenius tries to hold him saying, "Nay, temperately! Your promise…Is this the promise that you made your mother?" (3.3.87;111). In one last attempt to check Coriolanus, Menenius invokes the influence of Volumnia upon Coriolanus, and with that,

Coriolanus breaks. He accepts banishment as a form of final freedom, triumphantly declaring, "Despising / For you the city, thus I turn my back. / There is a world elsewhere" (3.3.163-65). Coriolanus desires to be free of the mother who controlled him, the city that threw him out, and the society that pushed him to the breaking point. The stresses he has succumbed to have one solution: escape.

The patriarchal system, which engrained in Coriolanus the custom of supplicating to one's parents, as explained by Fletcher, breaks down in this moment, and Coriolanus cannot bear the reversal. The climactic scene of the play occurs in 5.3 as Coriolanus rests in camp, awaiting the moment to attack Rome alongside the Volsces. Volumnia, Virgilia and Young Martius approach to plead for an end to the siege and to beg Coriolanus to retreat. As they approach, Coriolanus's willpower begins to break down as his feeble determination is made apparent: "My wife comes foremost, then the honored mold / Wherein this trunk was framed, and in her hand / The grandchild to her blood. But out, affection!" (5.3.25-27). Coriolanus notices his wife yet offers no grand interpretation of her presence. In his mother, however, he sees the creator of himself: the body which created him. Lastly, rather than recognize his son as his own, he views his son as the continued blood of his mother, as if Young Martius were a mirror of himself as a boy. Volumnia's life's work does not end with his absence; instead, Coriolanus sees his own son as the continuation of Volumnia's power. Before she even speaks, she bows, as Coriolanus comments, "My mother bows, / As if Olympus to a molehill should / In supplication nod" (5.3.32-33). In this simple metaphor, Coriolanus views his mother like the mountain wherein the gods live and rule, bowing to a molehill, representing himself. This reversal greatly perturbs Coriolanus. He cannot bear his mother, her eyes at his feet,

in supplication. He falls upon his knees at her feet and begs, "I prate / And the most noble mother of the world / Leave unsaluted" (5.3.55-56). Volumnia accepts his contrition "O, stand up blest" (5.3.60), bestowing upon him her maternal blessing. She drops to her knees before him, further upsetting him, confessing, "I kneel before thee and unproperly / Show duty, as mistaken all this while / Between child and parent" "What's this? / Your knees to me? To your corrected son?" (5.3.62-66). Immediately identifying the fault within himself, "corrected" meaning rebuked, he grasps his mother's hands and draws her up in reverence.

The voice of patriarchy rises through Volumnia as she reminds Coriolanus of his indebtedness to her: "Thou art my warrior; / I holp to frame thee" (5.3.72-73). As she faces her grown son, a force that all of Rome is fearful of, she demeans him and reminds him that he owes her for his success. He is her creation and not his own man. She continues to berate him:

> There's no man in the world
> More bound to 's mother…
> Thou has never in thy life
> Showed thy dear mother any courtesy
> When she, poor hen…Has clucked thee to the wars and safely home,
> Loaden with honor. (5.3.180-86)

Her manipulation of his memory and of his understanding of his success is highly effective. In Act I she rejoiced in the fact that she sent him into danger, and had he died, "his good report should have been my son" (1.3.21-22), yet now she convinces Coriolanus that his success and continued safety as a soldier is owed completely to her.

She is due the honors that were bestowed upon him, for he is her warrior. Volumnia is able to maintain a stronghold over her son who desperately wishes to be free of her.

Realizing her reason for being there, Coriolanus immediately tries to establish a boundary against their pleas: "Do not bid me / Dismiss my soldiers or capitulate / Again with Rome's mechanics" (5.3.94-96). Trying to distance himself from her grasp, Coriolanus tells his family he will not stop his attack on Rome, nor will he again go before the common people (mechanics) seeking their approval. In response Volumnia threatens him, "We have nothing else to ask but that / Which you deny already. Yet we will ask, / That if you fail in our request, the blame / May hang upon your hardness" (5.3.102-05). The manipulation tactic Volumnia employs places the blame upon her son, thus hopefully absolving Volumnia of any blame that could be attributed to her in the event that Coriolanus does raze the city. Volumnia remains conscious of the opinion of the patriarchal society in which she lives, and that fault could be laid at her feet as a female who raised a son who turned against the republic.

By placing the blame for any battle securely in Coriolanus's hands, Volumnia tries to protect herself from the Roman people, regardless of how the impending battle may fall. She challenges him to

> Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin
> And bear the palm for having bravely shed
> Thy wife and children's blood.... Thou shalt no sooner
> March to assault thy country than to tread...on thy mother's womb
> That brought thee to this world. (5.3.134-43)

By mimicking the actions that would have previously occurred after a successful battle, the gifting of palm leaves and honors, she belittles her son, claiming that those honors would be laid upon him for killing his own family. Lastly, she demeans him by commanding he will not do it, for in so doing, he would deface the very being that brought him to life. Volumnia realizes she must command him further as to how to extricate himself from this rather difficult position in which he has placed himself. She encourages him to "reconcile them…Give the all-hail to thee and cry "Be blest / For making up this peace!"" (5.3.158-62). Volumnia encourages Coriolanus to bear the olive branch to both sides so that they both may be happy. She claims that a battle, no matter where the victory falls, will undoubtedly label Coriolanus as the man who once "was noble, / But with his last attempt he wiped it out, / Destroyed his country, and his name remains / To th' ensuing age abhorred" (5.3.167-70). Volumnia argues that in seeking peace, Coriolanus may in fact be esteemed, but in seeking destruction, no matter the outcome, his name will be detested by the whole of humanity for generations to come. Growing up in a society where the appearance of masculinity, of duty, and of virtue is highly prized, Coriolanus holds these patriarchal ideals close to his heart. He is a product of his environment. His desire to be free of the world that created him is no match for the hold that the world has upon him.

As a final admonishment, Volumnia returns to her knees, and in a fit of curses cries, "The gods will plague thee / That thou restrain'st from me the duty which / To a mother's part belongs" (5.3.188-90). One particular aspect of Coriolanus and Volumnia's relationship that makes it unique stems from the fact that there is no father present. Volumnia successfully ingratiated herself into the role of father and has maintained the

due respect a son would give a father. In a traditional patriarchy, only a daughter would submit to a mother, not a son. In her husband's absence, Volumnia was able to remove her gender from the relationship and convince her son that she is owed all reverence. Finally, Coriolanus submits as we expected. As he cries out his final acceptance of her plea, he declares, "O, my mother…You have won a happy victory to Rome, / But for your son – believe it, O, believe it! – Most dangerously you have with him prevailed, / If not most mortal to him. But let it come" (5.3.208-12). Coriolanus admits his defeat yet also indicates the coming of his own death. By giving way to his mother and abandoning his attack on Rome, he knows he will face a mortal struggle. However, he accepts its inevitability. Coriolanus realizes the only way to be free of his mother is to die.

Before Coriolanus meets his death at the hands of the Volsces, Volumnia is hailed through the streets of Rome as their patroness, and the savior of the city. Menenius himself professes her to be the "worth of consuls, senators, patricians / A city full" (5.5.58-59). Her worth as an effective instrument of politics and peace is finally realized in a sense, yet she never speaks again for the rest of the play. As she is heralded through the streets of Rome, she is silent. Many productions of the play have staged this moment to depict a plethora of meanings and insinuations; however, a literary interpretation can be had from the simple lack of speech. Volumnia may have saved the city, but she will not ever be a part of its government again.

For all his life Coriolanus has struggled to prove himself a man: masculine, virile, bloody. Through bloodshed and vanquishing, Coriolanus has been a display of manhood as defined by a patriarchal society. Coriolanus dies having reverted back to the warrior post he knows so well. He enters the camp and immediately claims to have fostered a

peace between the warring cities. Aufidius accuses him of treason, pointing out, "He has betrayed your business and given up / For certain drops of salt your city Rome – / I say your city – to his wife and mother…at his nurse's tears / He whined and roared away your victory… thou boy of tears" (5.6.111-20). In this moment Coriolanus tries one more time to be his own man, a man who does not need to kill to prove his worth, only to be reminded of his dependency and inadequateness as a man. Challenging the Volscean accusations he growls

> Cut me to pieces, Volsces; men and lads,
> Stain all your edges on me. Boy! false hound!
> If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,
> That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
> Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli:
> Alone I did it. Boy! (5.6.133-38)

Coriolanus reverts to the only confident role he possesses: a killer. Confronting the onslaught of the Volsces, he reminds them of the destruction he reaped upon Corioli and the fact that he did it alone. Constantly feeling the need to prove his mettle, he harkens to his solo achievements. It is not enough; he must die. As the Volsces draw around him, Coriolanus draws his sword but dies. Just as he indicated to his mother in the previous scene, Coriolanus anticipates his death. He did not anticipate the utter destruction of his manhood prior to his death. It is in that action that Coriolanus is defeated, not in death. Aufidius reminds Coriolanus that he is simply a tool, a boy, controlled by others.

What we learn about Coriolanus's childhood throughout the play proves that the patriarchal system in Rome condones Coriolanus's childhood, arguably because Rome

benefits. The background information on Coriolanus's childhood and Volumnia's mothering pervade the play as the audience witnesses the decline of Coriolanus. As a representative voice of the Roman patricians and government, Cominius declares admiration for Coriolanus's achievements in battle from a young age, thus supporting Coriolanus's upbringing. Through her actions specifically, "Volumnia…inculcates in her son the ideologies of the Roman state" (Jankowski 106). Cominius recounts, "In the brunt of seventeen battles since / He lurched all swords of the garland" (2.2.116-17). Seventeen times Coriolanus has entered battle and emerged victorious as the hero of the day. The system of patriarchy benefits greatly from Coriolanus and consequently his mother. Mother and son quickly fall victim to the society that they fervently tried to impress.

None of these ideologies held dear by patriarchy show compassion for the mother and son who are ultimately destroyed. Both Volumnia and Coriolanus seek a light at the end of the tunnel that never existed. Coriolanus is murdered, and Volumnia is hailed the Patroness of Rome. With her son dead, she no longer possesses a male to control and manipulate, and her usefulness as a person is erased. The breakdown of the patriarchal system affects her nearly as much as it affects Coriolanus. Volumnia will live out her days in silence and solitude, without voice to raise in opposition or action. With Coriolanus destroyed, Volumnia's speech is nipped off; she never speaks again in the play. Volumnia's involvement in politics was permissible as she could puppeteer her son without the outward appearance of doing so. The leading politicians knew Volumnia's power but could accept it as long as they were benefitting. Upon Coriolanus's exile, Volumnia was rendered useless. In a desperate attempt to save the city, she is encouraged to beg for mercy. Once again, Rome benefits from this mother-son relationship that has,

so far, upheld patriarchy. The tragedy of the play is inherent in witnessing these two people struggle to succeed in a world that has no safety net for them. Once turned upon, Coriolanus is discarded, and Volumnia is silenced without a male body to use as her voice in a male-dominated society.

The patriarchal society in which Shakespeare wrote existed in a post-Medieval world with the long-standing traditions of centuries prior entrenched in family structure. The need for warrior-statesmen had ended long before, yet entrenched beliefs in the ideology of patriarchy were deeply rooted within the people. This patriarchy adopted a multitude of beliefs about gender and its displays in everyday society. Coriolanus becomes an example of how one man's attempt to live up to these standards ends tragically. Volumnia, firmly entrenched in this system as well, becomes an instrument of this system, acting through her son to affirm society's expectations. Volumnia reaches for new heights yet does so only within the boundaries allotted to her as the mother of a warrior. Once the warrior is lost, her worth as an individual is lost as well. As mother and son overcompensate to model these ideals of masculinity and garner the respect they desire from others, they are rewarded. Upon reaching the crest of success, they are thrust down into a chaotic chasm, reviled by the society that created them. Without an obedient puppet that outwardly daunts those who must be subdued, Volumnia can no longer engage with the body politic. Having been raised to be that puppet, Coriolanus can never be his own man—respected for his own work and independent from the machinations of patriarchy. In a world organized by an underlying belief in patriarchy, no one can live for oneself.

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